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ABSTRACT
                This report describes a case study in the use of peer
mentoring and cohorts to improve doctoral student retention and summarizes
survey data reflecting the experience of eight universities. The University
of California/California State University Fresno Joint Doctoral Program in
Educational Leadership was designed to create cohorts of doctoral students
and doctoral faculty. With 50 percent of all doctoral students failing to
complete their programs, universities are turning to group dynamics as a tool
to maintain persistence. The formation of doctoral student and faculty
cohorts is used to promote the retention of graduate students in professional
schools. The close collaboration and reinforcement that develop between
students and faculty improves task completion while it promotes team building
practices. The practice of using mentor students from other cohorts, both in
the university and the community, enhances the students' exposure to learning
and provides much needed support to members trying to work full-time while
earning their doctorates. The interaction between students and their cohort
mentors facilitates more productive movement between students, the
university, and the global marketplace. Data from a survey of 108 doctoral
students from eight universities suggests that group cohesiveness and
persistence to the degree are significantly correlated. (Contains 23
references.) (JLS)

Improving Doctoral Student Retention

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With fifty percent of all doctoral students failing to complete their programs, universities are turning to group dynamics as a tool to maintain persistence. The formation of doctoral student and faculty cohorts has been shown to be highly effective in promoting the retention of graduate students in professional schools. The close collaboration and reinforcement that develops between students and faculty improves task completion while it promotes team building practices.

The practice of using mentor students from other cohorts both in the university and the community enhances the students' exposure to learning and provides much needed support to members trying to work full-time and earn their doctorates. The interaction between students and their cohort mentors facilitates more productive movement between students, the university, and the global marketplace.

With the increasingly rapid and diverse changes in our society today, the role of the university must continue to change as well. While producing educated, responsible members of society remains our goal--priority, traditional methods are being challenged by a rapidly changing student population.

Researchers have found cohesiveness and peer mentoring to be beneficial to students, although many programs still emphasize the traditional, isolated type of doctoral studies where the students are individually responsible for meeting the requirements outlined in the university catalog, with only a possible serendipitous relationship occurring between students, or between students and faculty. Traditional doctoral programs (Hughes, 1983) tend to discourage professionally oriented doctoral students today since these students are not typically full-time resident students in their twenties with few outside commitments. The purpose of this study was to examine group cohesiveness to persistence of doctoral students in an educational leadership program.

In higher education today quality and efficiency are being called for, as never before. Approximately fifty percent of all doctoral students in this country fail to complete their programs, especially professional schools with non-traditional students, more universities could rely on group dynamics as a tool to maintain

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student persistence. Educators employed full-time are at particular risk for "stopping-out", needing group support and peer mentoring to give them an added push toward completion of their doctoral programs (Ethington & Smart, 1986; Papalewis & Minnis, 1992). Doctoral students are more likely to persist in educational leadership programs that rely on the powerful, indispensable element of peer mentoring.

Educational researchers found that the support and encouragement from doctoral cohort members improves persistence rates in doctoral programs (Brien, 1992; Cesari, 1990; Dorn, Papalewis, & Brown, 1995; Tinto, 1988). Tinto (1988) argued that retention of students in higher education is dependent upon the involvement of individuals in social aspects of learning as much as their involvement in the intellectual aspects of learning. According to Bruffee (1978), peer mentoring can accomplish as much in a university setting as it can in a K-12 setting. Peer-group influence is ideally suited to practitioner-scholars, educators pursuing doctorates (Bruffee, 1978). Clark & Clark (1996) suggested that increasing the quality of mentoring experiences within cohort groups would increase the effectiveness of educational leadership programs.

Case Study

The University of California/California State University Fresno Joint Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership (JDPEL) emphasizes peer mentoring through the creation of a uniquely collegial atmosphere among student-to-student and student-to-faculty interactions. The program was designed to create cohorts of doctoral students as well as cohorts of doctoral faculty in an informal atmosphere of collaboration and collegiality. Students are admitted together and form a cohort (each Fall). Working closely together, cohorts develop a collective personality with caring members encouraging persistence in the doctoral program. Also, existing cohorts become peer mentors for new cohorts. Students are assigned an individual peer mentor from an existing cohort with whom they form a one on one supportive, working relationship. This strong peer mentoring emphasis is considered an essential aspect of the preparation for the role of professional scholar (Papalewis & Minnis, 1992).

Methodology

Department chairs/coordinators of Educational Leadership Doctoral Programs were approached in August 1994 at the annual conference of the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) to invite their participation in a study on group cohesiveness. Questionnaires were mailed to eleven universities; eight universities responded, for a total sample size of 108 doctoral students.

The item selection for the survey instrument was based on the definition of persistence as well as the eight factors that clearly emerged as cohesiveness constructs from the literature (Blake & Mouton, 1985; Cartwright, 1968; D'Augelli, 1973; Evans & Jarvis, 1980; Fisher & Ellis, 1990; Greene, 1989; Katz & Kahn, 1978; Lee & Bednar, 1977; Lott, 1961; Mabry & Barnes, 1980; Rosenfeld & Gilbert, 1989; Shaw, 1976; Stogdill, 1972; Stokes, 1983):

1) common goals or enemies;
2) success at attaining goals;
3) self-disclosure, risk-taking;
4) member support;
5) common values and interests;
6) interpersonal compatibility;
7) commitment to group; and
8) meeting of needs such as self-actualization needs

Of the 24 Likert-scale questions, 12 were measures of cohesiveness, and 12 were measures of persistence. Three open-ended questions inviting descriptive answers regarding cohesiveness and persistence were included in the survey instrument.

Descriptive statistics and correlations were computed for students' responses on the Likert-scale items to determine if students perceived a positive relationship between cohesiveness and persistence. An overall score for cohesiveness and persistence was developed by adding the response score for each identified item making up each construct. The overall relation of the Cohesiveness and Persistence scale scores yielded a correlation of .767 ($p< .01$), indicating that the cohesiveness and persistence measures were significantly correlated. The open-ended answers were

analyzed for the emergence of common themes regarding the relationship between persistence and membership in a highly cohesive doctoral group.

Results

The results of this study concur with the literature pertaining to peer mentoring, group cohesiveness, persistence, and higher education, which suggests that goals and social aspects of group work are highly interdependent. Groups who feel committed to each other, and to the group, who share common goals, are more likely to meet group goals, such as earning a doctorate. The data showed:

Δ Cohesiveness leads to greater commitment to a group, and to the goals related to membership in that group, in this case, the doctoral degree;

Δ Students indicated that they felt a profoundly positive relationship between cohesiveness and persistence;

Δ Peers mentors (intra and inter cohort members) provided greatly needed support, encouragement, and motivation;

Δ Belonging to a doctoral group was a vital aspect of doctoral studies that encouraged students to remain in their programs and make consistent progress toward their degrees;

Δ The social and collaborative aspects of group work have been found to be equally as important as the tasks, and tasks are enhanced via group dynamics;

Δ Cohorts develop a collective personality with caring members encouraging persistence in the doctoral program;

Δ The cooperation and collaboration that first develops in the doctoral program, continues and expands as cohorts graduate and disperse into the global workforce. Previously graduated cohorts provide a known professional base with which new graduates can connect and professionals have continuous access to dedicated doctoral students immersed in the latest practices.

This study provides support for research that has found social and collaborative aspects of group work to be just as important as the task aspects, and that tasks are enhanced via group dynamics (Fisher & Ellis, 1990). Linking this study to the literature clearly substantiates the need for an emphasis on group

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dynamics and peer mentoring in doctoral programs designed for the working professional. The overwhelming positive responses regarding the power of peer mentoring from doctoral students who were also practitioners in a variety of organizational settings (K-12, higher education, community colleges, prison industries, social work, human resources, etc.) indicate that the doctoral cohort can provide vital support and mentoring to members trying to work full-time, maintain their personal commitments and earn their doctorates.

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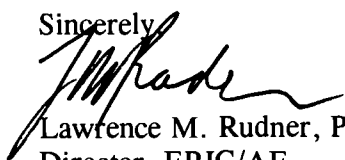
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